

AN ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGE



*Words and pictures
by Elaine Brook*

*A small, white
cottage nestles in an
acre of organic gardens,
in England's green and
beautiful Herefordshire.
Surrounded by fields, with a
stream and woodland to the
south, it is the home of a
Buddhist center, Shen Phên
Thubten Choeling, loosely
translated from the Tibetan
as 'Dharma garden (place)
for the benefit of others.'*

People come to Shen Phên Thubten Choeling – many of them from busy cities – for the peace, but not necessarily for the quiet. Birds sing, frogs croak, and sheep bleat. The cycles and seasons flow as they have done for centuries; the moon waxes and wanes, and snow, rain, and sun take their turn through the year. People stay for group retreats or individual retreat, and find the pace of life slowing down, supporting their meditation. Many find it a delight to be able to pick their own salad for lunch or fruit for breakfast, or to watch the full moon rising behind the oak trees.

Working in the garden is, for me, a daily mandala offering to the buddhas and to all beings, human and animal, who come to enjoy it. It is a daily practice of mindfulness to grow food and flowers while bringing as little harm as possible to the other beings (and there are many) who also live here. It is an opportunity to take responsibility for our own food and the way it is produced, while leaving space for birds, bugs, rabbits, hedgehogs and others to find their own food as well. We live in a cohabitation, which brings balance to the natural world, and keeps our vegetables healthy.

The organic herb garden grows and develops year by year. The herbs are mainly used fresh and in season, but many are dried for use in the winter months or to give to people who can't grow their own. Herbal medicine is natural and gentle, without the risks of the side effects of synthetic medicines. Of course it has to be organic, as the pesticide residues can do more harm than the herbs do good! Not only to the recipients of the herbs, but also the insects, birds, animals and fish which would be killed directly or indirectly by the chemicals.

Solar panels heat our water. It doesn't save us much money because we were frugal with hot water before we had the panels, but we wanted to make an example of reducing the use of fossil fuel because of the harm it brings to animals and people. The harm comes from pollution, global warming, and the wars that are used to ensure its continued cheap supply. For the same reason, in winter, we only increase the heating in the house after first putting on a thick sweater. Everything biodegradable is composted, partly because the plants need it, and partly because if it goes in landfill it harms other beings directly and indirectly, by producing the greenhouse gas methane, and toxic run-off into rivers.

Watching the plants and animals live and co-exist is a constant reminder that dependent-arising is not just a principle which applies to mental states, but manifests in every part and process around us. Just by being alive, we interact in every moment of every day with every other being in the complex web of relationships we call life. What we call 'environment' is not something separate we live *in*, but a collective term for all the beings, including ourselves, that co-create it as an ongoing dynamic process. Respecting this process as if it were a living being as well as our life-support system was well understood by indigenous communities everywhere, and is now being relearned in industrialised urban culture as Gaia Theory.

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My two favourite quotes from the Dalai Lama are:

'Buddhism can be explained in terms of two points: First, a deep understanding of the interdependence of all things and events, and second, the practice of non-harming, of helping others, that is based on the understanding of the first.'

'Meditation is something that needs to be done 24 hours of the day.'

Often the simplest teachings are the most profound; these few short sentences open a door to a way of life based on constant mindfulness of the interpenetrating chains of events which ripple outwards from our every action and non-action. Not only every interaction with living beings, but also every cup of water, mouthful of food, and unit of energy is connected to a web of relationships with other beings, and may bring harm or help to them. In his book, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, His Holiness encourages us to try to direct our every action in ways that will bring the most help and least harm to other beings, looking at the consequences in humanitarian or environmental terms.

Because of this we try not to buy products produced in harmful ways. We use reclaimed or coppiced timber for building and although we are almost self-sufficient in our own fruit and vegetables, when we need to supplement these, we don't buy anything that has been sprayed with pesticides. This would be to invest money and therefore support the industries that produce and use them. Millions of



Pear blossom over the Milarepa hut at Shen Phen Thubten Choeling



The pond is a focus for wildlife

insects, birds, and fish are killed every year with these chemicals. Often this is happening on plantations in third world countries where the land has been taken from the peasants, who are then forced to work in poor conditions and are themselves made ill by the pesticides.

We are sometimes asked about this by people (even strict vegetarians!) who say that organic food is too expensive, so they have to buy 'conventional' food even if it has been produced by killing many beings. However, a closer look reveals that most food bought is highly processed, often out of season, and flown in by jet – and therefore very expensive. If we can let go of attachment to convenience and luxury, and live simply on local in-season produce, it is actually much cheaper to live on food that is not the result of harming such huge numbers of sentient beings.

Having spent many years living and working in Buddhist cultures in the Himalaya, I feel that if we looked at the original context of the Buddha's teachings, we would have an insight into the kind of issues His Holiness is addressing in his book. The principle of 'systems thinking' shifts our focus from content and structure to context and process. So we could ask, what was the context of these teachings, and what process were they intended to engender in their practitioners? One of the main differences between the original culture in which these teachings were given, and most of present day culture, was one of scale. Even the great 'cities' were relatively small and compact, and had strong links with the surrounding area which supplied their food and water. Most people had little academic education, but had a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of soil, air, and water, and all the living beings that are part of them. They also had a deeply interconnected social system of reciprocity and co-

operation in order to farm, travel, learn, communicate, and look after each other's health. They didn't need to be taught these things by Buddhist teachers because they were already steeped in them from birth. The Buddha taught a way of developing their existing understanding in order to overcome suffering, for themselves and for others.

What our increasingly urbanised and intellectually educated society has lost is that deeply-felt interconnectedness with all other living beings. We have paid a price for a culture of individual rights and privileges. It is interesting to hear that Tibetans don't seem to have a word (or a concept) for 'alienation,' or 'low self-esteem.'

No matter how much we define terms, words have a powerful emotional effect on us. It may well be that focussing more on phrases like 'interdependence' and 'dependent co-arising' may bring more balance to the process for members of our individualistic society than only using the word 'emptiness', however accurate a literal translation this may be. When we directly recognise other beings as an 'extension' of ourselves, we have no choice but to reach out to help alleviate their physical suffering, just as we would automatically remove our own hand from the fire. This has nothing to do with confusing temporal and ultimate happiness, which is sometimes the objection to this idea. We can still be holding the view that only enlightenment brings ultimate happiness – but we would not use that as a reason to leave our own hand in the fire!

The bodhisattva commitment to help all sentient beings involves becoming enlightened ourselves in order to be of most benefit to them. Practising non-harming and actively helping on a moment-by-moment daily basis is the '24-hour' meditation process for most of us who are not in full-time retreat. Not

because we have confused alleviation of physical suffering with the teaching that alleviates all suffering, but simply because that is the process for our path to enlightenment: it is a bringing into actuality the merely intellectual understanding of 'no-self'.

We are not in a position to preach to people who are starving, exploited, enslaved, or bombed. Particularly if their situation results from the actions or co-actions of our own 'democratically elected' governments and their partners, the corporations; particularly if we are living in relative comfort as a direct or indirect result of these actions (which is usually the case). Not just because people who are suffering so much probably would not listen under these circumstances, but mainly for our own integrity. There are courageous individuals who are prepared to actually share those people's hardships and risks with equanimity and it is only from that 'place' that appropriate teachings will naturally arise.

In the context of sitting, well-fed, on a comfortable cushion, the appropriate action surely has to be to work within our own society and persuade (largely by example), those engaged in harmful actions to refrain. Our motivation for this work needs to be complex. We act to create better conditions for the victims of those who do harm, from a sense of gratitude for having the opportunity to engage in this practice, and to save the perpetrators from being reborn in the hell realms as a result of what they do. This brings a sense of balance; protection from becoming an extremist and engaging in harmful action ourselves.

Even if we are not in a position to actively work with disadvantaged people, suffering animals, or to campaign for their situation to improve, we can watch the ordinary actions of our everyday lives to ensure we are minimising the harm to which we may be contributing. Thich Nhat Hanh has suggested using the telephone ring as a reminder to engage in the practice of mindful awareness. It is an interesting extension of this exercise to use the 'bleep' of the electronic checkout while we are shopping, in a similar way. Every time the machine registers the bar code, it is not only adding up the customer's bill, but also sending a message to Head Office to order a replacement for what has just been purchased. So the mind begins to focus on the money we are investing, bit by bit, in the various industries that produce the things we buy. How much are we investing in animal testing, factory farms, insecticide sprays, child labour, sweatshops, oppressive regimes and so on? Do we use an ordinary bank account or pension that invests in these things, or even arms sales?

It is a challenging exercise to engage in, as there is a huge blanket of denial and suppressed guilt in our society over the excess of material comfort we have been conditioned to expect, the cost of which is the suffering of numberless other beings.

This practice is not intended to lead to the nihilism of feeling we cannot consume anything at all, but more of an invitation

to break free from the post-modern religion of consumerism and the 'rights' of consumers to have everything they want as quickly and cheaply as possible. It is an opportunity to live simply and feel in balance with the mindfulness that has consciously chosen a series of actions to minimise harm to other beings. Not everyone will come up with the same choices; people have different situations and different levels of understanding of how the chain of causation actually works.

Some texts warn against teaching 'emptiness' to those without the ability to fully understand it, as it can lead to a belief that things do not exist at all. However, [I believe that this type of] nihilism usually manifests as the idea that because the physical suffering of others is just the ripening of their karma, an inevitable manifestation of samsara, it is not appropriate to take any action to try to change it. This converges dangerously with the denial permeating our affluent society that dares not look at the cost of that affluence to millions of other beings – an awful lot of damage done by an awful lot of cleverness and efficiency. After all, the misfortunes of others may well be the results of their actions in previous lives, but what about the future results of our own actions if we continue to participate in the processes which are causing the harm now? This raises the question that perhaps it would be a useful balance to us as members of this very clever society, to engage in practices which are simple, grounded, modest, and yet cut through that denial and disconnection in revealing ways.

Just as Lam Chung gained realisations from sweeping the meditation room and became an arhat, there may be an untold wealth of realisations just waiting out there in the digging of the garden, the nurturing of seedlings and hedgehogs, the joy of watching the song thrush raise its brood. If, as a sangha, we can support each other in our meditation practice and in the daily mindfulness to cause least harm and most benefit to other beings, we will be living in a richness of human love and spiritual fulfilment that will inevitably spread to many others. If we can continuously rediscover, in practices as apparently simple as gardening, the essential truths of interdependence and the wisdom of practising a non-harming lifestyle, we can continuously reaffirm our bodhisattva commitment from experiences in everyday life. ☸



Shen Phen Thubten Choeling is an FPMT center, recently renamed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche 'Shen Phen Thubten Choeling: Centre for Socially and Ecologically Engaged Buddhism.' Tel: (44) 01981 550 246. Email: dharmagaia-cooperative.org

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